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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dominant genre of the last American television season--the action/adventure/law enforcement show--and discusses differences between this genre and television shows in the 1950s to 1970s. Today's programs are described in terms of the similarities they exhibit with the strategies of the New Right and the apparent contradictions between the progressive movements of the last 20 years--feminism, the black movement, anti-imperialism--and the demands of patriotic nationalism. Analyses of eight series that are representative of the genre, but constructed around and through a more overt form of national address than most other programs, indicate that they share similarities in discursive and aesthetic form and structure. Similar aspects of the genre's national address, plus other characteristics of the programs, are illustrated by references to specific shows. In addition, the paper addresses the following issues: how this genre attempts to create a new, more palatable, authoritarian, patriotic, and repressive national identity by incorporating elements and signs from progressive movements of the last 20 years and its spectacular and exciting visuals; and how television's ubiquity makes it a major part of the content of shared perceptions through which Americans try to make sense of themselves both as a nation and individually. (5 end notes) (CGD)

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NATIONALISM AND GENDER IN AMERICAN TELEVISION

by

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Paper presented to the 1986 International Television
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NATIONALISM AND GENDER IN AMERICAN TELEVISION

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Television today has taken the place of film as the medium of national unification, the space for the construction of a national consensus which makes it possible for citizens of every race, class and sex to communicate in a common language of shared information and perceptions. This, at least, is what is claimed for television by its supporters. Seen from another vantage point, it is precisely television's ideological work to construct a sense of consensus, a unitary 'national identity' with which a very disparate citizenry can identify on a subjective and individual level. Television is a medium uniquely suited for this task in late-20th century America. As Raymond Williams has argued, television allows increasingly privatized reception from an increasingly centralized transmission. In a society whose basic unit is the "mobile privatized family," isolated by its job mobility from a permanent community, television becomes a stable source of "companionship" and information about the world, both of which, in an earlier time would have been procured from a variety of sources.¹ In Robert Rosen's words, "Television

provides us with an agenda for discussion; it provides the language for political discourse; it defines the parameters of acceptable social action."²

Thus, one of television's discursive practices is to inscribe the spectator as a "fellow citizen," in its attempt to fix a coherent, unitary identity for the nation. According to Gramsci, this is part of the hegemonic process: the dominant class has much at stake in offering an image of the nation that will win it the consent to rule and so to pursue its own interests. But other groups such as the working class and the political left also attempt to win support through alternative constructions of the national identity.³ In attempting to gain support for their projects, both the right and the left often lay claim to speaking the authentic and authorized "true" national values with which the individual is urged to identify in a collective sense of "national pride". Individual identity and collective identity are thus joined at the level of nationality and hence ideas of nationality can be utilized to inspire both individual and collective action.

These questions of nationality and national identity slide into issues of nationalism. Nationalism is intimately linked with the subjective experiencing of national pride and is most commonly expressed in patriotism, a rhetoric that stresses the concepts of honor, courage, strength, supremacy, rightness and glory⁴. Two things can be immediately remarked upon here:

national identity is formed in a relation of difference, and most often dominance, to other nations. And the attributes of the good or "great" nation are also the traditional attributes of masculinity. Thus nationalism and its representation through patriotism offer positions through which women as well as men, the working class as well as the ruling class, can identify with patriarchal dominance.

Each historical moment has its own precise articulation of these factors due to the conjuncture of particular social, economic and cultural forces. Similarly each mode of representation has its own history and instances of forms of representation must be placed in this context. With this in mind, I want to examine the dominant genre of the last television season, the action/adventure/law enforcement show. This genre is, of course, not new. Its antecedents can be traced to pre-television days, to film and radio, but it also has a long history in television as well. Cop, spy and private detective shows were staples of 1950's television. Less ambiguous than their filmic counterparts of the same era, these tv shows tended to emphasize the enforcement aspect of law enforcement, but enforcement in a "decent," relatively non-violent manner: the 'good' cop, the 'clever' spy or detective inevitably wins by virtue of the rightness of the middle class values he embodies. If he's tough it's always within limits. And he, always a he, works alone or with a trusted assistant (only if the assistant

performs secretarial duties or is a youthful relative, such as a niece, is she permitted to be a she.)

This fairly consistent formula was complicated in the 60's by the gathering force of criticism of American society and in particular by the growing awareness of racism and other forms of institutionalized discrimination. Spy shows became as much spoofs as straight adventure stories (viz. The Man From Uncle and Mission Impossible), and the late 60's and early 70's saw the hip, socially aware cop (Kojac, Barretta, Streets of San Francisco). But by the mid-70's the genre's status had waned, its numbers were fewer and it was all but totally eclipsed by the liberal character comedy-drama whose major examples are The Mary Tyler Moore Show, All in the Family and MASH. These shows were perceived as qualitatively different from all other earlier television series. Their achievement was seen to be their challenging of stereotypes and formulae, their greater open-endedness, their reliance on character interaction. They were also lauded for their "social criticism," their ability to confront "important issues." They offered, then, a national identity that was liberal and humanistic. This, too, functioned to deny fundamental social contradiction, of course, and posited a utopian pluralism, which Mary Beth Haralovich argues is the foundation of television's representational practices, "pluralist partially due to its recognition and effacement of the heterogeneity of social life."⁵ The dominant genre of today, the

action/adventure/law enforcement series, carries out television's integrative function in a new and different way. These programs are of particular interest to me because of the similarities with the strategies of the New Right as they negotiate the apparent contradictions between the progressive movements of the last 20 years--feminism, the black movement, anti-imperialism--and the demands of patriotic nationalism. I have watched numerous episodes of eight series which seem to be representative of the genre: Airwolf, The A-Team, Cagney and Lacey, Knightrider, MacGruder and Loud, Miami Vice, Riptide and Scarecrow and Mrs. King. Despite surface differences all share important similarities in discursive and aesthetic form and structure. The most basic is that these series are constructed around and through a more overt form of national address than most other programs. All the main characters work either directly (most common) or indirectly in law enforcement. They are either police officers, CIA agents or detectives, part of the repressive state apparatus, in Althusserian terms. Since these enforcement agencies can so directly represent the nation itself--as a kind of microsmic image of it--the series characters become not only characters, but embodiments of the National Character, its virtues and values.

Another aspect of the genre's national address is its positioning of the individual as part of a social unit greater than herself/himself to which ultimate loyalty and allegiance is

owed. In these series, this social unit is not a community of equals, but rather a rigid hierarchy with the series lead characters all in positions of willing submission to a higher authority whether it is the Agency, the police force or the Law.

Finally, national address invokes an "us" with which the spectator is encouraged to identify by presenting a "them", an enemy Other. If our national integrity and security are threatened then the nation must pull together to survive. This kind of seige mentality most obviously refers to conditions of war. Indeed, the rhetoric and imagery of these shows can be identified as militaristic as well as patriotic, contemporary narratives of heroism and virility on behalf of the State in neat adventure story formats which offer weekly closure on a note of American triumph.

The militaristic discourse hinges most closely on the hierarchies of command and obedience of the agency and on the structures of legitimated violence which are the libidinal heart of each episode--violence on behalf of a hegemonic drive to suppress and eradicate difference. These can be seen in a number of the genre's conventions. One is the adherence to a fairly strict hero/villain dichotomy in which the villains are most commonly third world/minority men, either of the domestic or international terrorist variety, depending on the show's format, soviets and "hippie weirdo" types. Female villains exist to a lesser extent, but when they do they are generally sexually

predatory vamps. Even on the odd occasion of a white middle class male villain, as on one episode of Airwolf, the ex-army general in question was surrounded by a dedicated group of third world and hippie males and sexy, young and older, professional women, all only too eager to carry out his wishes to fire a stolen missile at Moscow.

One especially common villain is the minority pimp/drug dealer. Riptide featured an episode focused on flashy Tyrone Diamond, a pimp/drug dealer loaded down with gold jewelry, traveling in a white stretch limousine and attended by Asian and black goons. On MacGruder and Loud, Officer Jenny Loud poses as a prostitute, a common gambit on these shows. She is approached not only by a black pimp in fur coat, Excaliber and diamond earrings, but also by a slimy Chicano drug dealer, who abducts her with the intention of rape. And Miami Vice consistently features latino and Latin American drug dealers and pimps. The possibly racist implications of this reiteration is presumably offset by the third world/minority "good guys"; on The A Team, Cagney and Lacey, MacGruder and Loud, Miami Vice and Scarecrow and Mrs. King there are regular third world/minority characters who work for the Agency--most of these are, however, in supporting roles, even when they portray a higher up, as in Scarecrow and Mrs. King. The exception is Miami Vice (Hill Street Blues is also an exception but that is outside the purview of this paper), but here the "star" persona of Don Johnson tends to militate against true

equality of placement.

How then is racial difference organized in these programs? Along an axis of moral values. Minorities may be included in the "us" of Americanness if they conform to the values, rules and hierarchies of the Agency. Those without this loyalty and obedience are ineradicably Other: they are cold-blooded killers, so degenerate they even turn on their own people if necessary. They are criminals beyond redemption, immune to the appeals of reason or emotion, essentially evil, the stuff of the middle class paranoia the New Right is eager to construct; respectable, law-abiding Americans must band together, using any means necessary to eradicate this national "filth." And indeed it is this kind of epithet that is consistently used in the programs by the heroes to describe the villains: they are "scum," "garbage," "slime," "animals." This is a rhetoric reminiscent of 1950's anti-communism and of the military.

The enemy outside is similarly portrayed: soviets and arab terrorists alike are merely brutes without respect for human life, crafty rather than intelligent, and inevitably unable to deal with the necessary technology and strategy. As in the cop shows, "crime" or "terrorism"--and the two are equated--is emptied of political content. There is no reason for it other than a gratuitous love of violence, "fanaticism," or greed for wealth and power. In the A-Team episode, "Moving Target," the Arab "revolutionary guerillas" are politically motiveless; they

simply want to unseat the existing regime which is friendly to the U.S. and take over themselves. Structurally, they exist only as the rivals in military ability to the A-Team. The A-Team is there to defend the existing regime from these cold-blooded murdering rebels. In this, as in all the CIA shows, the implication is that without American agents--models of courage, ingenuity, and technical know-how--the world would be in chaos, a collection of merciless, totalitarian regimes. Other nations are unable to take care of their "problems" by themselves. Even West Germany was shown, on one episode of Scarecrow and Mrs. King, to be impotent against a gang of neo-Nazis.

The shifts of levels in logic which these shows employ in their treatment of questions of race, crime and political action is neatly summed up in a speech delivered by CIA agent Lee Stetson--Scarecrow of Scarecrow and Mrs. King--to Mafia hit man, Mario, "You're nothing but a flunky errand boy for whatever crime syndicate will hire you. In Italy you're linked with the Red Brigade; in Germany with the Bader Meinhof gang and in England with the IRA--not to mention Bolivian terrorists and dope dealers." When Mario claims he'll escape, Lee replies, "I'll let every agent on this planet know about you and you won't be coming back." Thus are left-wing and national liberation struggles equated with Mafia racketeering and drug trafficking, while American agents are the globe's clean-up squad. Important to note is the primary level of discourse: real groups, real nations

and nationalities are referred to; there is none of the obliqueness that characterised such 1960's shows as Mission Impossible and The Man From U.N.C.L.E.. Nor is there any use of euphemistic language in the threats directed at the villains or the kind of conciliatory ending in which the battling groups admit to a stand-off. This is the "get tough" discourse of the New Right.

The violence of the language is matched by the visual and structural emphasis on violence; aesthetically and narratively it is what these series are centered around. A particular kind of violence is emphasized, however: it is the technology of death and destruction and the professionalism of those who use it. It is a militaristic construction of violent action--and the spectacle of it is presented as the greatest adventure thrill of them all. Exciting displays of futuristic technology figure prominently in this aesthetic; much of it is military, but if not it is at least marked as macho and very expensive, like Sonny's Ferrarri in Miami Vice and a great deal of air time is spent dwelling on the power of these objects. Most striking in this respect is Airwolf, the jet helicopter that works for the CIA. It is equipped with so many electronic, computerized control devices it makes the cockpit of a 747 look plain. A good half of the show is devoted to Airwolf performing in all its glory: especially emphasized are point of view shots from within the helicopter as it skims across the earth at supersonic

speeds--akin to Miami Vice's dazzling steadicam shots from the Ferrarri as it zooms down the road and KITT the car's superspeed abilities in Knightrider. Speed indicates power; by being the fastest, Americans are the most virile--superior technology becomes equivalent to superior manhood and nationhood.

Airwolf also features beautiful infrared computer vistas of the landscapes below and very complex computer graphics of targets and objects for the utmost in precision. The vivid colors and abstract, shifting graphics are reminiscent of two things: one is non-representational, experimental video art and the second is the cockpit of a Viet Nam era jet bomber. The spectator is offered the excitement of visual beauty in the context of technological expertise and a primitive struggle to the death; Apocalypse Now comes to mind as a referent for this figuration of violence. Airwolf, then, is a machine exquisitely custom-made for killing and it offers to its pilot, Stringfellow Hawke, a god-like power. In one episode, Airwolf hovers outside the huge upper windows of a casino, strafes it, then finally bombs it, all the while amplifying Hawke's voice above the incredible uproar as he commands the enemy to surrender. In another show, Airwolf fires an interceptor missile that detonates a nuclear missile in mid-take off and emerges from the nuclear blast unscathed.

Airwolf is not alone in this respect. In all the shows, the various types of guns--especially machine guns--are given

prominent places in the visuals and lingered over by the camera. The spectacle of violence is elaborately played out: gun battles, flaming destruction, the massing of police forces, lights blazing, helicopters whirring, ranks of uniformed individuals. Since there is no doubt but that the villains, inhuman or subhuman as they are, richly deserve their fate there is no ambivalence about their killing. Indeed, they do not die, nor are they killed, they are "blown away," "neutralized," "taken care of." The ferocity in the representation of violence on television is astounding; it has escalated noticeably in the last few years. With their use of extra-loud and graphic sound effects for punching, kicking and gunfire and the slamming, shoving and head-kicking of the fights, television series have begun to match the visceral response produced by film violence.

But, as is traditional in the war film, it is through the risking of death and the performance of legalised killing that male bonds are cemented, that male intimacy is engendered and permitted: thus Miami Vice's Crockett and Tubbs transcend racial and regional differences to find (American) masculine unity. What is new is that this process now applies to women. One of the new faces of the nationalist discourse of the 80's is the recruitment of the feminist "new woman" to the masculinist and militarist rhetoric of the cop/action/adventure genre. In these shows, female strength is figured in masculine terms, just as their relationships with each other and with men on the job

follow the buddy model. These female cops, spies and detectives are tough; they can wield a gun and push a criminal around with the best of them. Yet traditional sex roles are also maintained: Cagney and Lacey share feelings and cry together, have more fully developed family and private lives and past histories than their male counterparts, and exhibit maternal, nurturing feelings toward each other, Lacey's children and her husband Harve. But these feelings are restricted to their personal lives and relationships. Any feminist and political use of emotion--empathy with the oppressed, compassion for suffering, aversion to violence--is refused. The realm of "feelings" is privatized and the realm of aggressive action becomes equivalent to the social and public. In Cagney and Lacey, identification is solicited from the female spectator on the basis of the beautifully acted and portrayed intimate, mutually supportive, fun and active friendship between the two women which then can be used to call forth consent to their police activities. For example, in one episode, Lacey tenderly cries over her child and begs his forgiveness because she has lied to him and then later illegally enters a suspect's room without a search warrant, by pretending she thinks the man is in the process of committing suicide. This violation of due process is treated as a particularly bright kind of ingenuity and is the source of goodnatured "buddy" joshing between the women. In another episode, Lacey is kidnapped by a disturbed young man who holds

her hostage with the demand for two million dollars. Cagney's anguish at her friend's suffering and possible death is truly moving. Her later participation in the man's killing by a massive squad of police with high-powered rifles and helicopters can only be sanctioned. Furthermore, since spectators are given access to the caring, feeling side of Cagney and Lacey's characters, they can only be justified when they harass a suspect, shove him with a gun, call him a "scumbag" and decry the leniency of the criminal justice system that protects the rights of the accused and lets them go free on "technicalities." Like so many of these series, Cagney and Lacey wants to have its cake and eat it: reactionary "law and order" rhetoric is uneasily married to certain feminist-inspired values, most particularly here, female friendship.

Other shows attempt similar negotiations. One strategy is the presentation of the hero as a (semi-) New Male. Certainly the heroes of Miami Vice, Scarecrow and Mrs. King, Riptide, and Remington Steele are openly presented as sex objects, gorgeous hunks for the delectation of the female spectator. But however glamorized and sexualized these "beautiful" men may be, and however much they may indulge in self-deprecating humor and permit themselves to show a little fear, a little hesitation, nevertheless, when it comes to getting the villain and saving the heroine they perform in traditional masculine fashion. This is one of the ways in which traditional gender hierarchies, if not

traditional sex roles, are maintained. No matter how tough the women are--and some are not at all tough, like Amanada King, the scatterbrained housewife/mother who is a CIA courier and is delighted to cook breakfast for all the agents--males still control the power structures and have the higher authority. The women follow orders and, even when they do, often get in over their heads and have to call on male rescuers.

These shows have a gloss of unconventionality--they play with gender stereotypes and 1950's images of cops and agents. Even the fairly rudimentary A-Team is represented as a group of oddballs--visually, they recall 70's gay rock group, Village People and they say and do crazy, funny things. Perhaps the best contrast to the genre is MASH which presented quite a different kind of national identity with which to identify: a liberal vision of equality, solidarity of the oppressed, pacifism, and anti-authoritarianism. In MASH, the Army is an obscene joke. In today's cop/action/adventure show, the hero can say, like Sonny Crockett in Miami Vice, "I may seem a bit unorthodox, but when it comes to being a cop, I'm strictly business." Through its incorporation of elements and signs from progressive movements of the last 20 years and its ever more spectacular and exciting visuals, this genre attempts to create a new, more palatable authoritarian, patriotic and repressive national identity. Its ubiquity, which is television's ubiquity, makes it a major part of the context of shared perceptions through which Americans try

to make sense of themselves as a nation, and individually as American blacks and whites, women and men.

Notes

1. Raymond Williams, Television, Technology and Cultural Form, (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), chpts. 1, 3, 4. See also his The Year 2000, (New York, Schocken Books, 1983) for an elaboration of these concepts.

2. Robert Rosen, "Style Wars: What's News in the 80's" in The American Film Institute's 1985 National Video Festival Catalog, ed. Lynne Kirby, (Los Angeles, American Film Institute, 1985), p. 28.

3. Antonio Gramsci, Selections From the Prison Notebooks, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971). See also Chantal Mouffe, ed., Gramsci and Marxist Theory, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) and Colin Mercer, "After Gramsci", Screen Education, no.36, Autumn, 1980.

4. Benedict Anderson, Imaginary Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, (London, Verso Editions, 1983), pp. 11-41 and 104-149.

5. Mary Beth Haralovich, "The Suburban Family Sitcom and Consumer Product Design: Addressing a Middle Class Lifestyle in the 1950's", unpublished paper, 1985 Society For Cinema Studies Conference, p.1